

MACAULAY'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

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and Gibbon. Yet it is not the thing. I have a conception of history more just, I am confident, than theirs. The execution is another matter. But I hope to improve/ *

What was this juster conception of history ?

It is certain that Macaulay did not underrate the difficulties of the historian's task. Some authors have not thought it difficult. ' It is natural to believe/ asserted Dr. Johnson in the Rambler, ' that no writer has a more easy task than the historian/ He explained to Boswell the reasons for this view.

Great abilities are not requisite for an historian ; for in historical composition, all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent. He has facts ready to his hand ; so there is no exercise of invention. Imagination is not required in any high degree ; only about as much as is used in the lower kinds of poetry. Some penetration, accuracy, and colouring will fit a man for the task, if he can give the application which is necessary.²

Macaulay's view, set forth in the Essay on History, published in 1828 in the Edinburgh Review, was exactly the opposite, though to a certain extent he agreed with Johnson.

To write history respectably—that is, to abbreviate dispatches, and make extracts from speeches, to intersperse in due proportion epithets of praise and abhorrence, to draw up antithetical characters of great men, setting forth how many contradictory virtues and

vices they
united, and abounding in *withs* and *withouts*
; all this is
very easy. But to be a really great historian is
perhaps the
rarest of intellectual distinctions. We are
acquainted with
no history which approaches to our notion of
what a his-
tory ought to be.³

¹ Journal, Dec. 7, 1849. Trevelyan, ii. 269.

² Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G. B. Hill (1887), i.
424-5.

³ Edinburgh Review, May 1828, p. 331.